DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 390 939 TM 024 564

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TITLE Encouraging Learning through Portfolio Assessment.
PUB DATE Sep 94
NOTE 28p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, April 18-22, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Assessment; Educational Practices; Interviews; *Performance Based Assessment; *Portfolio Assessment; Portfolios (Background Materials); *Principals; *Self Evaluation (Individuals); Student Evaluation; Teacher Attitudes; Test Construction; *Test Use

ABSTRACT

This paper examines interviews with principals and surveys of 19 teachers in 5 schools about their use of portfolio assessment. Six themes are identified that reveal the impact of portfolio assessment. Teachers reported that using portfolios broadened the types of evidence they considered in assessing students. The transition to portfolio assessment has also shifted the role of students toward taking more responsibility for assessing themselves--a difficult transition for some students. The use of portfolios also encouraged teachers to raise critical questions about the purposes of assessment. Perhaps partly in response to this, teachers are increasingly focusing on student outcomes. Further, portfolios seem to encourage teachers and principals to think of schooling as a continuous system instead of a set of distinct grades and classrooms. Finally, the traditional educational system appears to constrain teachers' ability to use portfolio assessment more effectively. Implications for practitioners are discussed. (Contains 15 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Encouraging Learning Through Portfolio Assessment

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September, 1994

The Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands

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Abstract

This paper examines interviews with principals and surveys of teachers in five schools about their use of portfolio assessment. The author identifies six themes which reveal the impact of portfolio assessment. Teachers reported that using portfolios broadens the types of evidence they consider in assessing students. The transition to portfolio assessment has also shifted the role of students toward taking more responsibility for assessing themselves — a difficult transition for some students. The use of portfolios also encourages teachers to raise critical questions about the purposes of assessment. Perhaps partly in response to this, teachers are increasingly focusing on student outcomes. Further, portfolios seem to encourage teachers and principals to think of schooling as a continuous system instead of a set of distinct grades and classrooms. Finally, the traditional educational system appears to constrain teachers' ability to use portfolio assessment more effectively. The paper concludes with three implications for practitioners.

I. Introduction

Assessment has been undergoing a transformation over the past decade. Educators are increasingly using alternative forms of assessment as companions to, and even replacements for, standardized norm-referenced tests. One specific form of alternative assessment is portfolio assessment, in which samples of student work are collected in order to record student progress and provide evidence of student abilities. Teachers, schools, districts, and even states, are adopting portfolio assessment to inform themselves, parents, and the public about student progress.

This study seeks to learn more about how teachers are using portfolio assessment and how schools are supporting them. It examines interviews and surveys with principals and teachers from schools that are participants in the Assessment Working Party (AWP) of The Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands. During AWP meetings, teachers and administrators from member schools continually asked for concrete information about how to start, or further implement, portfolio assessment. This study arose from efforts to answer their questions.

Using data from five AWP schools, this study focuses on answering the following questions: What are teachers' conceptions of portfolio assessment and how are they using portfolios to assess student progress? What difficulties are teachers facing and what resources are they using? I

was also interested in the larger support systems that surround teachers. Therefore, I asked how principals and schools support teachers in their use of portfolio assessment and how they encourage school-wide portfolio use.

From interviews and surveys, six themes emerged which reveal some of the influences of portfolio assessment. Teachers reported that using portfolios broadens the types of evidence they consider in assessing students. The transition to portfolio assessment has also shifted the role of students towards taking more responsibility for assessing themselves. Many teachers observe that that is a difficult transition for some students. The use of portfolios is also encouraging teachers to raise critical questions about the purposes of assessment. Perhaps partly in response to this, teachers are increasingly focusing on student outcomes. Further, portfolios seem to encourage teachers and principals to think of schooling as a continuous system instead of a set of distinct grades and classrooms. Finally, the traditional educational system appears to constrain teachers' ability to use portfolio assessment.

Section II of this report describes the sources of data used for this analysis. Section III relates how teachers report using portfolios in their classrooms, and how principals describe both their and the districts' support of portfolio use. Section IV details the themes that emerged from this research. The [illegible] concludes with a discussion of three important issues raised f[illegible]is study, which teachers and schools might consider when

implementing portfolio assessment.

II. Study Methodology

The data for this study consist of information gathered from teachers and principals in five schools in four states in the northeastern United States. Two of the schools are in Vermont, with one school each in Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Maine. The five schools were chosen because of their membership in the Laboratory's Assessment Working Party. The Laboratory's relationship with these schools facilitated access to them and assured their high level of participation.

Four of the schools participating in this study are elementary schools, while one is a combination elementary and middle school. According to their principals, one school is considered urban, two suburban, and two rural. The five schools range in size, with two serving less than 200 students, one serving about 300 students, and two serving slightly more than 800 students. All five of the schools' student populations are predominantly Caucasian, with minority populations ranging from 15 to just a few percent. Based on the percent of their students who receive financial assistance to purchase lunch, which ranges from 2 percent to 85 percent, one of the communities can be considered wealthy, two middle class, and two poor. These schools are in no way intended to be a representative sample of the school and student populations of the country.

portfolio use on a variety of dimensions (e.g. to assess student development, as a teaching tool, to discuss work and progress with students). These questionnaires were sent to the principals to disseminate to the teachers. All five principals returned their questionnaires, while 19 out of the 24 teachers returned their questionnaires, for a response rate of 79 percent.

The grades taught by those teachers who participated in the survey range from kindergarten to sixth grade. Teachers' experience ranges from one to twenty-six years. The average experience for participating teachers is twelve years, but six of the teachers who responded have taught between six and ten years.

III. Portfolio Use in the Five Schools

The extent to which portfolios are used in the five schools ranges from just a few classes and subject areas to all classrooms in the school. Portfolios are most commonly used in writing and language arts, and less frequently in math. Two of the five schools are from Vermont, which requires math and language arts portfolios to be submitted to the State Department of Education in grades four and eight. These portfolios are required to include a range of student work, a table of contents, and a student selected "best piece," as well as a letter from the student explaining this choice.

Rather, as indicated by their involvement in the Laboratory's Assessment Working Party, these schools are probably more advanced in their use of portfolio assessment than many other schools.

The data for this study were collected through a series of interviews and questionnaires with principals and teachers. First, telephone interviews were conducted with each of the five principals about the use of portfolios by teachers in their school, the support provided by their school, district and state, and their views on portfolio assessment. Principals were then asked to select three or six teachers in their school (depending on the size of the school) who represent a range of sophistication in the use of portfolio assessment (i.e. two teachers who the principal considers "beginners", two "practitioners," and two "reflective users"). The principals then asked these teachers to complete the questionnaire about their use of portfolio assessment. The principals did not indicate which stage each teacher represented, only that there was a range of users.

Questionnaires, one instrument for teachers and a similar one for principals, were constructed based upon the authors' knowledge of current literature and practice of portfolio assessment and the initial telephone interviews with principals. The questionnaires contained about 10 open-ended questions on teacher and school portfolio use. The questionnaires for teachers also included 15 Likert scale-type questions (e.g. "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree") to elicit the extent of that individual's

Portfolios play a central role in teachers' assessment of students, but are not the sole means. Teachers also reported using tests, papers, projects, reports, demonstrations, journals, observations, and oral presentations to assess students' performance. More detailed information about what teachers keep in student portfolios is provided later in this paper.

Resources Teachers Use

The 19 teachers who responded to the survey reported using a variety of different resources to inform themselves about portfolio assessment. Some of these were provided by the state or district, some by their principal, and some were sought out independently by individual teachers. The most frequently used resource for teachers is written materials. Sixteen of the teachers, or 84 percent, reported using written materials to inform themselves about portfolio assessment. These written materials range from articles in general education journals (Educational Leadership was the most frequently mentioned journal) to books specifically about portfolio assessment.

Fifteen of the teachers, or 79 percent, reported discussing portfolios with other teachers either formally or informally. Teachers also found discussions with their peers to be the most helpful method of learning about portfolio assessment. Training, which teachers consider to be the second most helpful resource, is also commonly utilized by teachers.

Fourteen teachers, or 74 percent, attended training or workshops, usually provided by the state or the district.

Although I expected more teachers to utilize planning periods, only three of the nineteen teachers, or 16 percent, reported devoting planning periods to portfolios. Other resources that teachers reported using are courses at local colleges and universities (32 percent), visits to other schools (21 percent), and local or regional support groups (16 percent).

Principal Support

All five principals are proponents of portfolio assessment. They all believe that portfolio assessment is an important school reform that should be used by all teachers for all students. Yet the principals take different approaches to encourage teachers to use portfolio assessment. The two Vermont schools, of course, have the state regulation working behind them, which makes portfolios mandatory in the fourth and eighth grades. To prepare teachers and students for this state mandate, one of the Vermont school principals requires portfolios to be used by all her staff, thus diminishing the pressure of state exam preparation on two grade levels. One other non-Vermont principal takes the mandate approach as well. This principal introduced portfolios through faculty meetings, workshops, and reading materials one year and mandated them the next. She then tied them into the student reporting system and requires teachers to use

portfolios when discussing student progress at parent-teacher conferences.

Two other principals discussed a softer approach, coaxing use of portfolios by their teachers. One felt that alternative assessments are a natural direction for teachers to follow: "...the more teachers know about learning, the more they look for accurate, authentic ways to encourage and assess learning," she explained. These principals provide resources for teachers, including discussions about the benefits of this approach, to encourage teachers to use portfolios.

Principals also reported employing a variety of means to encourage teachers to discuss student assessment with each other. All principals mentioned faculty or grade level meetings (or what one principal called "share sessions"), but more important is how principals use these meetings. For example, some teachers present to their fellow teachers and share their portfolio experiences with their peers, and some teachers work together on a sample of portfolios-in-process to discuss student performance, expectations, and scoring consistency and techniques. One principal strategically plans a meeting the month before the scheduled parent conference periods to discuss portfolio assessment. Several principals mentioned that they provide opportunities for teachers who have been to workshops to share what they have learned with other teachers.

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District and State Support

Some form of portfolio assessment is mandatory in four of the five districts where participating schools are located. Two of the five schools are from Vermont, where many state requirements for portfolios are carried out at the district level. District and state support in Vermont includes release time and training for both teachers and administrators concerning the creation, administration, and scoring of portfolios. In the two other districts which require portfolios, teachers are expected to compile a folder of student work and pass it on to students' next year's teacher. Support in these districts includes release time, workshops and conferences, and the purchasing of materials and supplies for portfolios. The fifth school's principal reported that her district "neither encouraged nor discouraged portfolio use."

Advantages of School-Wide Portfolio Use

Owen, Cox, and Watkins (in press) suggest that building a community beyond the individual classroom can help educators and others identify common resources, clarify learning criteria, and concentrate efforts on the building of "learning-centered schools." A comparison of the teachers in this study from the schools who use portfolio assessment school-wide with those isolated users suggests some of the advantages of school-wide implementation. Practitioners who teach in schools that have adopted

portfolios in all grades find portfolios easier to manage, tend to have more communication with their peers, and interact more with parents because of portfolio assessment. These teachers also reported greater support of the concept of portfolio assessment. Teachers who practice portfolio assessment in small pockets, by contrast, complained about the inconsistency of portfolio criteria and the difficulty of obtaining resources. However, due to the small size and purposeful nature of this study's sample, these findings can only suggest that there are advantages to school-wide portfolio use and point toward the possibilities for further exploration of specific benefits of school-wide portfolio use.

IV. Themes Underlying Teacher and Principal Responses

Regardless of the scope of its arena, portfolio assessment is having a number of influences on students, teachers, and schools. Examination of teacher and principal responses to the open-ended portion of the questionnaire reveal at least six recurring themes. Although the survey questions did not specifically focus on these concepts, they were mentioned frequently enough by teachers and principals, across both grade levels and school sites, that they seem to represent the shared insights and experiences of this group of twenty-four practitioners. They are:

(1) Portfolios encourage teachers to use a broad range and variety of student products for assessment.

(2) Portfolios encourage students to assess themselves, and this is a difficult shift in responsibility for some students.

(3) Portfolio use reveals both the multiple purposes of assessment and teachers' efforts to explore and clarify their assessment goals.

(4) Portfolio assessment tends to focus teachers' instruction on student outcomes.

(5) Portfolios encourage teachers and principals to think systemically.

(6) The traditional educational system constrains teachers' ability to use portfolio assessment more effectively.

These themes, which suggest both some of the problems and promises of portfolio assessment, are explained below.

(1) Portfolios encourage teachers to use a broad range and variety of student products for assessment. It follows from Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (1983) that assessments should provide students with opportunities to demonstrate the multiple dimensions of their intellect. Portfolios provide just such opportunities because of the variety of items that are kept in them. Teachers in this sample reported using a broad range of student products to make assessments. These include student journals, artwork, photographs of projects, audio tapes of students reading

or interviewing peers, w sheets, as well as standardized test results.

Portfolios also provide a place for both teachers and students to keep an on-going commentary on students' work and progress. Student-written reflections on their work, or "learning summary letters," are commonly included in portfolios. Teachers feel that these student comments provide opportunities for students to self-evaluate and reflect on their work and learning.

Teachers also related that they are using portfolios to keep closer observations of students and their development. In their study of one school's implementation of portfolio assessment, Lamme and Hysmith (1991) reported that "anecdotal (observational) records help teachers look at the positive, at what the children could do...about how individual children learned." (page 634). Twelve of the nineteen teachers in this study reported keeping observational notes about students in students' portfolios. These anecdotal notes provide teachers with the opportunity to jot down on-going remarks about an individual student's activities, behavior, and development which would otherwise be lost in more infrequent commentaries.

(2) Portfolios encourage students to assess themselves, and this is a difficult shift in responsibility for some students. Traditionally, students tend to wait passively for teachers to evaluate them. Portfolio assessment, by contrast,

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invites students to reflect on the quality of their work. Educational researchers have reported that portfolio assessment encourages student self assessment (Paulson et al. 1991, Tierney et al. 1991) and invites reflection (Herbert 1992). Vermont's portfolio system, for example, requires students to attach a letter to an item of their choosing explaining why they have selected this piece and why it represents quality work.

Many of the teachers who responded to the survey reported an increase of student responsibility. "My students are more aware of why they are doing what they're doing," explained a third grade teacher. "They are becoming more responsible as learners. They no longer look to me for a grade — we evaluate together," she said. Another teacher described increased student involvement in deciding what goes into their portfolio, which results in students thinking more about the quality of their work. When asked to advise other teachers on using portfolio assessment, one fifth grade teacher suggested that teachers "model for students what they will be evaluated on and how to evaluate themselves." Another third grade teacher recommended that when students are asked to make portfolio decisions, "they will respond and become involved in setting goals and gaining responsibility for their learning."

However, some of these teachers also feel that getting students to adjust to taking responsibility for their learning is one of the greatest difficulties of using portfolio assessment effectively. One teacher

commented that students are often satisfied with merely completing their work. "They [students] often feel their work is fine because they did it and finished it," she said. Another teacher wrote, "Self assessment is the hardest thing for them to understand."

(3) Portfolio use reveals both the multiple purposes of assessment and teachers' efforts to explore and clarify their assessment goals. Surveyed teachers had widely differing approaches to portfolio assessment. Some keep all the students' work in portfolios and see no distinction between a work folder and a portfolio, while others are more discerning about what goes into the portfolio and have carefully articulated criteria for inclusion. Different approaches are also apparent in the fact that some teachers allow students to select what goes into the portfolio while others reserve this task for themselves. Still others do not see the importance of this distinction, which has direct ramifications for both what gets chosen and the reasoning behind these choices. One third grade teacher has gone so far as to keep two separate portfolios, one for student selected work and one for her choices of student work because "I'm still not comfortable with using only the students' choices as an assessment tool."

Part of this variety of approaches is due, no doubt, to teacher individuality. As one teacher puts it, "Since teachers have different teaching styles, they should be allowed to implement portfolios in different ways."

Another reason is differing levels of teacher familiarity and experience with portfolios, which range from one to five years in this group of teachers. And, as Lamme and Hysmith (1991) noted in their study of one elementary school's use of portfolios, teachers at lower levels of implementation have more difficulty using portfolio assessment.

But these different approaches also reveal different valuations about the purposes of portfolio assessment. For teachers who believe, as one teacher in this study does, that the purpose of portfolio assessment is to reveal a child's "process of thinking, learning, and understanding," it is quite reasonable to allow students to make decisions about what goes into their portfolios. However, for teachers who are intent on providing evidence that students have mastered certain skills and achieved specific standards, it is more likely that the teacher will at least be involved in, if not solely responsible for, the decisions about what will be included in students' portfolios.

Furthermore, examination of this data suggests that portfolio assessment is driving teachers to ask critical questions about their own teaching, student learning, and the assessment devices that provide a connection between the two. For example, one teacher, indicating that portfolios are moving her to clarify the standards for student work, asks "How can the portfolio be assessed without the comparison of standards?" Another teacher notes the importance of "determining the portfolio's

purpose and establishing criteria for it." For one second grade teacher, portfolio assessment encourages him to ask more fundamental questions of himself: "Why are you doing it? What is the goal of your work with children and how can portfolios support that goal?"

One valuable aspect of portfolio assessment may be that it encourages teachers to explore the standards for student learning. Aschenbacher (1994) notes: "The positive consequences of alternative assessments seem to derive in large part from teachers' participating in the process of articulating and reaching consensus on valued student outcomes and criteria for judging success, not simply from adopting a list of outcomes and criteria provided wholecloth by others." (p. 214).

(4) Portfolio assessment tends to focus teachers' instruction on student outcomes. Many educational researchers have noted that alternative forms of assessment encourage teachers to adjust instruction to the needs of the child (Farr 1990, O'Connor 1992). Seligman (1989) theorized that alternative assessments clarify instructional objectives by focusing teachers on student skills. These contentions are buttressed by teachers' reports that their instruction is influenced by the use of portfolios. Only two of the nineteen teachers reported that portfolios do not influence their instruction. Fifteen also reported that they use portfolios to inform their lesson plans.

Aschenbacher (1994), in a study of the barriers to implementing alternative assessment, found that the greatest challenge to teachers was a "tendency to think in terms of classroom activities and not be able to specify desired student learning goals." (page 210). In explaining how their instruction is influenced by using portfolios, several teachers discussed various ways that portfolios have helped them to focus on student outcomes. According to one third grade teacher, "I'm more conscious of the end result, what the purpose of doing the work is, and how that purpose translates into 'quality' output." A fifth grade teacher talked about "focusing on a few skills," and then "adding other skills as they [students] are ready."

At least a few teachers link this focus on student outcomes to an explicit defining of standards which seems to naturally arise as a prerequisite to using portfolio assessment. One teacher commented that portfolio assessment encourages her to have more discussions with students about expectations, standards, and how students can reach them. A third grade teacher reported that "students now know what they will be assessed on prior to their work.... This teaches me a lot about them as learners."

(5) Portfolios encourage teachers and principals to think systemically.

Researchers have noted that portfolios encourage teachers to discuss student work and collaborate with other teachers (Vavrus 1990), and to

seek support from school and district authorities (Lamme and Hysmith 1991). A similar notion permeates teachers' discussions of improving portfolio assessment in their classrooms and schools. They told us that effective portfolio use necessitates increased communication and consistency both within and across grade levels.

While teachers in the study generally recognize that their peers have different teaching styles, many found themselves increasing their interaction with their colleagues as they discussed their portfolio assessment methods. Fourteen of the nineteen teachers indicated that their interaction with other teachers has increased because of portfolios.

Teachers also talked about more integration across grades. When describing the greatest difficulties they are having with portfolios, five teachers mentioned the isolation of not having a continuum to the next grade level. This results in having portfolios on only some students from the previous year as well as having differing levels of student familiarity with the concepts underlying portfolio assessment. "If students have not used portfolios in the past," cautions one teacher, "a lot of time is needed to model the purposes of the portfolio, how to select work and [how to do] self evaluation."

When asked what advice they would have for bringing their school to the "next level" of portfolio use, teachers talked about the need for a more cohesive and comprehensive school-wide approach. According to one

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teacher, "portfolios would have to be more of a joint venture between teachers." Another talked about getting "the whole building...involved." One second grade teacher suggested that "the staff needs to discuss what pieces work, what doesn't and how to develop the use of portfolios as an assessment tool school-wide." (Her emphasis). Another teacher proffered the idea of "team networks to use portfolios over more of the school's staff."

(6) The traditional educational system constrains teachers' ability to use portfolio assessment more effectively. Wolf (1994) has suggested in lectures that the administrative implementation of portfolios is different than the creation of a classroom and school culture that support portfolios. Wolf, LeMahieu and Eresh (1992) describe this culture as one of:

> demanding content and high standards for all students.... Unlike usual assignments, there are wider time limits; students keep working and submitting their work for suggestions and critique. Unlike the traditional system in which the unit . . . slams shut with a final test, you encourage students to return to earlier projects with understandings acquired later on. (page 10).

Teachers responding to the survey indicated that various aspects of school, as it is traditionally structured, constrain the effective use of portfolio assessment. These aspects include class scheduling, size, and classroom organization.

Teachers reported that time poses a significant problem for both

themselves and students. According to one fourth/fifth grade teacher, "[people] have no conception of the time and effort involved in this system." Many teachers concurred with the time-consuming nature of portfolios for teachers. "A lot of time is needed to...select work," was one typical response. Another fifth grade teacher commented, "It's a slow process and we need time to work through [it]." When asked to give advice to teachers thinking of using portfolios, another teacher, referring to the time consuming nature of the process, advised, "Be sure to build time into your schedule for portfolio reviews." Other teachers reported that students working on their portfolios are often disrupted by period changes or "pull-outs."

Another common refrain from teachers is the difficulty of effectively using portfolios with large classes. Given the attention necessary to compile, review, and comment on student portfolios, teachers of large classes feel over-burdened. For example, one experienced third grade teacher, with a class of 30 students, typified this sentiment with an understatement: "Small numbers in the classroom are definitely a great facilitator in doing quality portfolio assessment."

Portfolio assessment also represents a management challenge for many teachers. Each student's portfolio typically includes a variety of work, such as writing samples, worksheets, journals, and teacher notes and evaluations. Several teachers, even those with many years of experience,

mentioned that their greatest difficulty was managing all the paperwork. For example, when asked about the greatest difficulties using portfolios, one teacher with over twenty years of experience commented: "Managing all the paper! This can be a logistic nightmare."

V. Issues For Portfolio Assessment Users

This study, although limited in the number of participants and the variety of participating schools, raises many pertinent issues for those teachers and schools embarking upon, or considering, portfolio assessment. This paper ends by discussing three conclusions that have implications for practice.

First, it seems important to clarify the purposes for using portfolio assessment and then to structure the portfolio system to fulfill those purposes. Teachers in this study indicated that using portfolios helps them to think about and clarify their purposes for assessing students. These purposes include revealing students' process of thinking, providing evidence of student growth, and encouraging students to take more responsibility for their work. Clarifying the purposes of assessment helps in making decisions about what to include in portfolios and who chooses the pieces.

Second, portfolio assessment is useful in defining and communicating clear standards, criteria, and student outcomes. Several teachers in this sample suggested that implementing portfolios led them to

discussions about standards, i.e. what skills students should demonstrate and how those skills should be evidenced. Portfolio assessment is certainly not the only means to focus on questions about student learning, but the activities involving portfolios seem to spur teachers to explore these critical educational issues.

Third, school-wide support can help teachers use portfolio assessment more effectively. While teachers can, and do, successfully use portfolio assessment in isolation, the participating teachers felt that portfolios are more effective when implemented school-wide. They found that communication with fellow teachers makes using portfolios easier to manage and more coherent for students. Furthermore, school-wide support can mean many things: a library of 'how to' information about portfolios in the teachers lounge; faculty meetings devoted to discussing standards or evaluating a sample of student portfolios, or; sending small groups of teachers to visit other portfolio-using schools and reporting back the results to the rest of the faculty. Creating a common language, providing information, and increasing opportunities to discuss and shape student assessment may take a school to a higher level of portfolio use.

Notes

I am especially grateful to Jill Mirman Owen of The Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands for both her help in developing and executing this study and her meticulous editorial assistance. Sharon Rallis and Michael Huberman of the Laboratory were also supportive in providing constructive suggestions throughout the process. I would also like to thank the principals and teachers of the participating schools for their thoughtful responses in both interviews and surveys.

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